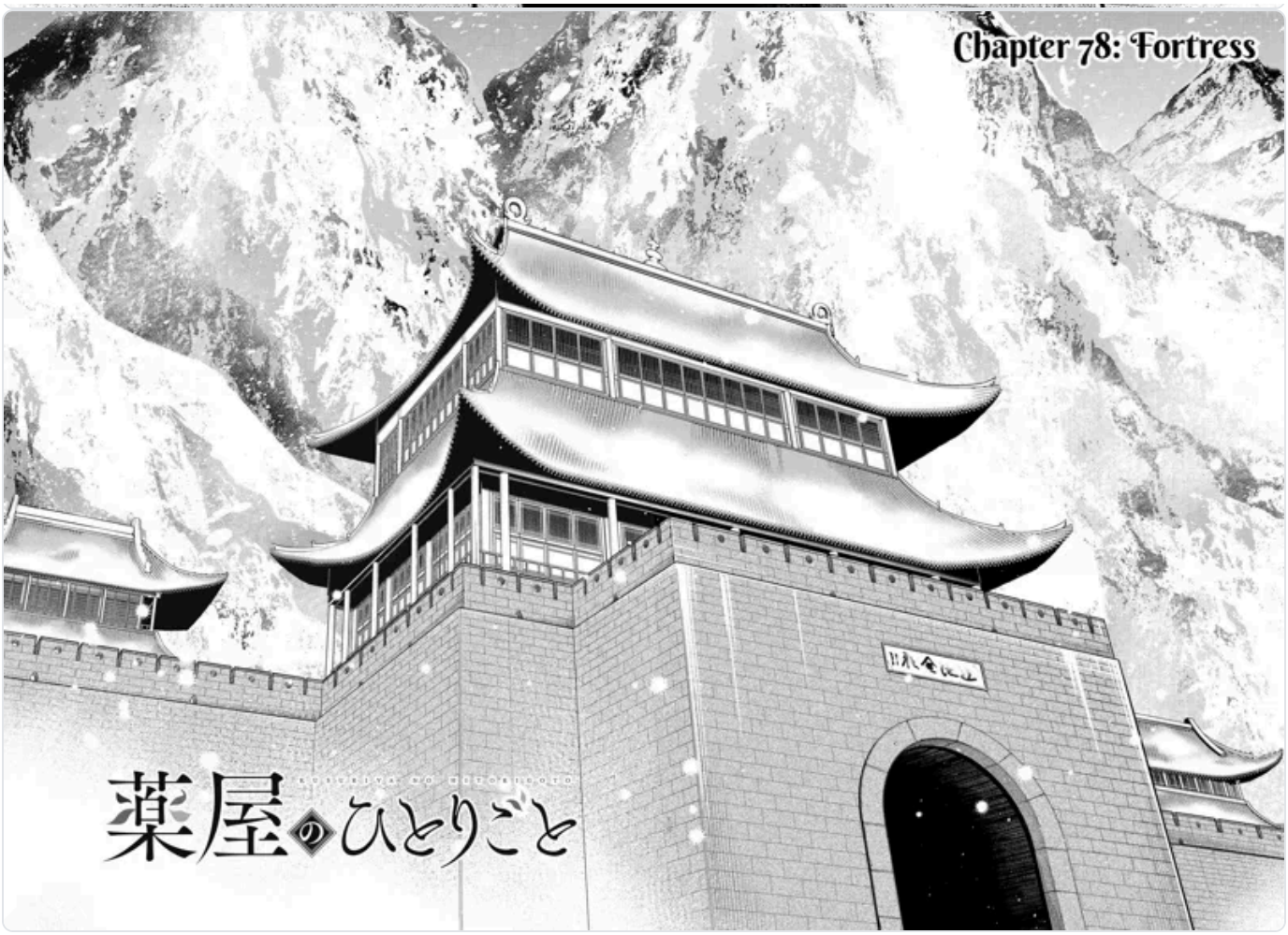
Chapter 78: Fortress


Chapter 78: Fortress
薬屋のひとりごと

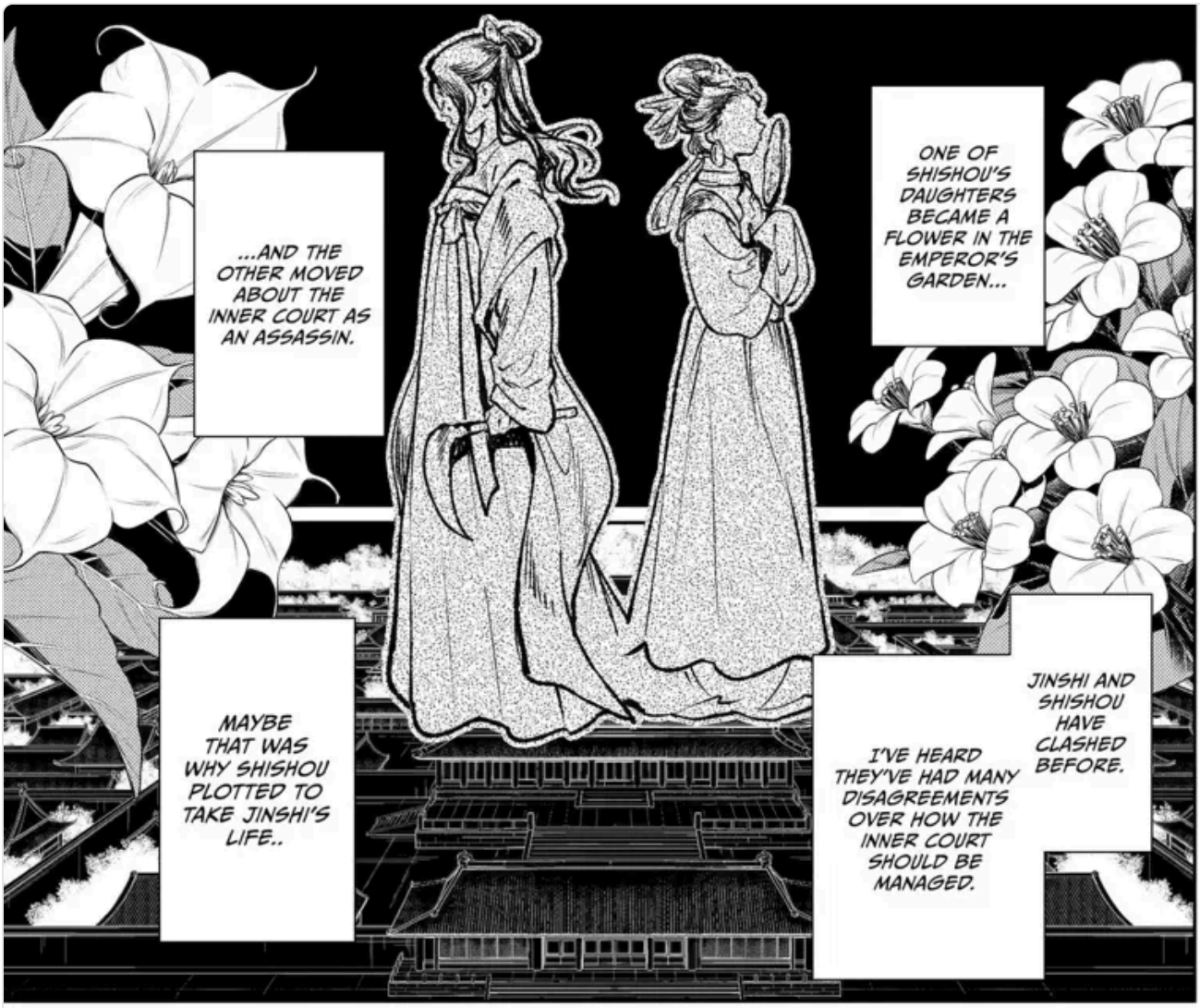
CRRK
I NEVER INTENDED TO BRING YOU ALL THIS WAY.
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK

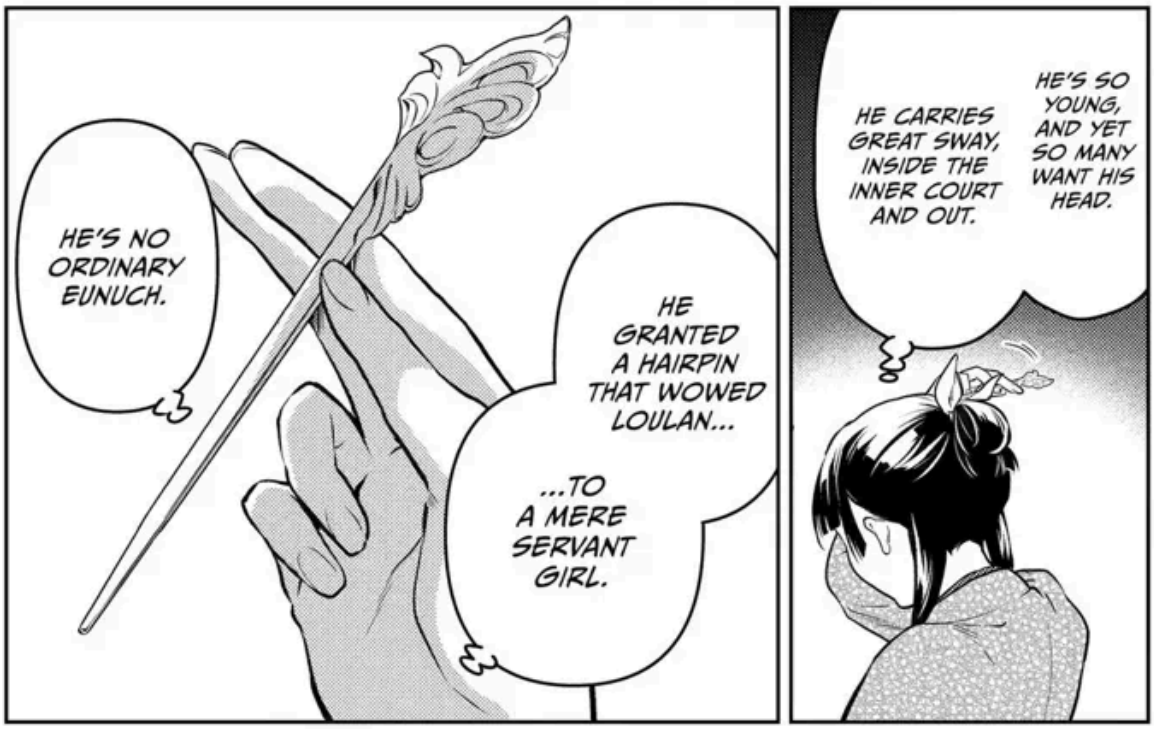
THIS IS THE ROOM THE PREVIOUS APOTHECARY USED.
QUITE A MESS HE LEFT...
...BUT PLENTY OF USABLE MATERIALS AND TEXTS TO READ.

PEEK

SHISUI IS THE ONLY ONE WHO TREATS ME AS HER OLDER SISTER.
HMM.
SHISUI IS YOUR HALF-SISTER, THEN?
IT WAS.
IF I MAY ASK, WAS SHISUI ORIGINALLY YOUR NAME?
EVEN BEARING THE SHI CLAN'S CHARACTER IN MY NAME WAS TOO MUCH FOR HER.
SO SHE TOOK IT WHEN I WAS STILL YOUNG.
LADY SHENMEI CANNOT STAND ME. THAT'S JUST HOW IT IS.

THAT MUST BE WHY.
AND YET LOULAN IS QUITE FOND OF IT.
AS AN ALIAS, IT'S FAR TOO OBVIOUS.
PEOPLE SAY SHISHOU HAS ONLY ONE DAUGHTER, LOULAN.
WHEN SHENMEI RETURNED FROM THE INNER COURT...
...SHE CAME TO TREAT HER HUSBAND'S DAUGHTER AS NOTHING MORE THAN A SERVANT...
...AND EVEN TOOK AWAY HER NAME.
SHE GAVE IT TO HER OWN DAUGHTER, AS THOUGH OUT OF SPITE.

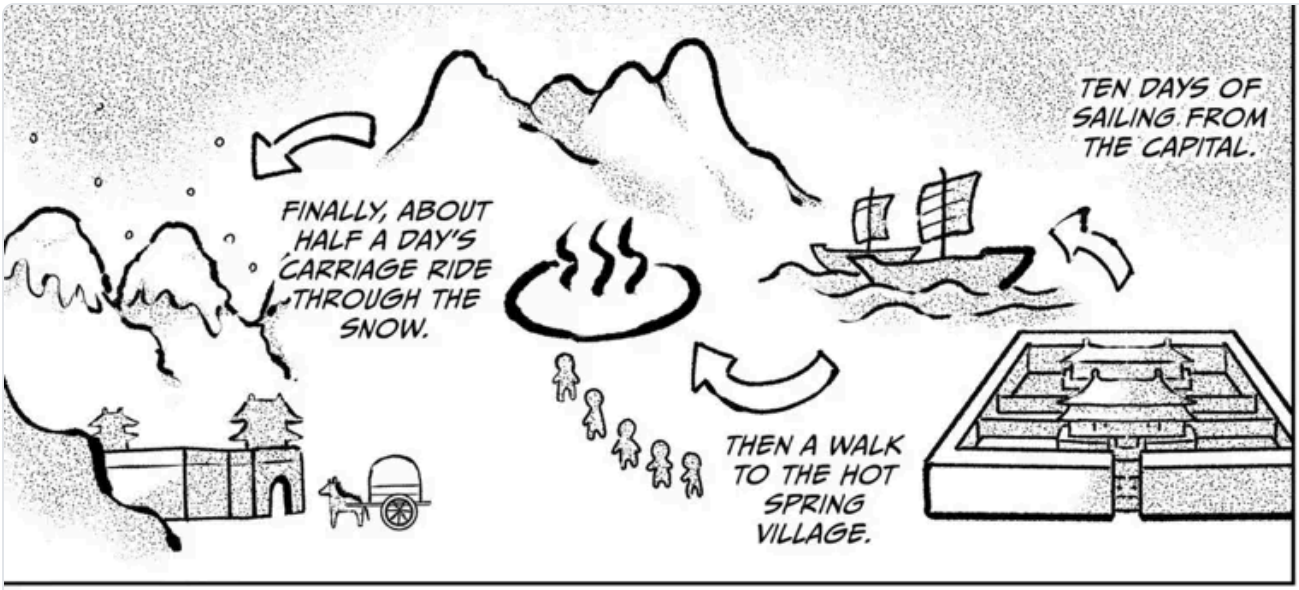

...AND THE OTHER MOVED ABOUT THE INNER COURT AS AN ASSASSIN.
ONE OF SHISHOU'S DAUGHTERS BECAME A FLOWER IN THE EMPEROR'S GARDEN...
MAYBE THAT WAS WHY SHISHOU PLOTTED TO TAKE JINSHI'S LIFE..
I'VE HEARD THEY'VE HAD MANY DISAGREEMENTS OVER HOW THE INNER COURT SHOULD BE MANAGED.
JINSHI AND SHISHOU HAVE CLASHED BEFORE.


HE'S NO ORDINARY EUNUCH.
HE GRANTED A HAIRPIN THAT WOWED LOULAN...
...TO A MERE SERVANT GIRL.
HE CARRIES GREAT SWAY, INSIDE THE INNER COURT AND OUT.
HE'S SO YOUNG, AND YET SO MANY WANT HIS HEAD.

WAIT. NO. HE'S NOT EVEN A EUNUCH.
HOW DID YOU DECEIVE THE EUNUCH CHECK WHEN YOU INFILTRATED DISGUISED AS ONE?
WHY ARE YOU ASKING THAT?!
...
UM...
HM?
THEY ONLY FELT OVER THE UNDERWEAR.
YOU DON'T NEED TO STRIP ALL THE WAY DOWN.
OH. SHE'S EMBARRASSED.

OFFICERS FROM THREE DIFFERENT OFFICES EACH CHECK AT ONCE.
BRIBING ALL THREE WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT.
RIGHT... THE CHECK IS TO FEEL IF NOTHING IS THERE, AFTER ALL.
IT'S NOT LIKE AN ORDINARY WOMAN WOULD TRY INFILTRATING AS A EUNUCH IN THE FIRST PLACE.
THEN, HOW?
HOW WOULD HE INFILTRATE THE GARDEN CLOSED OFF TO ALL MEN, SAVE THE EMPEROR AND HIS KIN?
THE EMPEROR'S KIN... JINSHI ISN'T THE SAME AGE AS THE IMPERIAL YOUNGER BROTHER.
COULD AN UNCASTRATED MAN DECEIVE THEM, THEN?
...JINSHI ACTS MUCH YOUNGER THAN HE LOOKS.
HOWEVER ...
...

IF ONLY HE DIDN'T HAVE THAT WONDERFUL, WONDERFUL BEZOAR AT THE TIME...
BACK DURING THAT SUMMER TRIP...
...JINSHI SAID HE HAD SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT TO TELL ME.
WHAT HAS YOU SO QUIET?
OH, NOTHING.
STAB
OH, WELL.
ALL OF THAT CAN WAIT.
I SHOULD REALLY FOCUS ON THE SITUATION I FIND MYSELF IN NOW.


TEN DAYS OF SAILING FROM THE CAPITAL.
FINALLY, ABOUT HALF A DAY'S CARRIAGE RIDE THROUGH THE SNOW.
THEN A WALK TO THE HOT SPRING VILLAGE.

IF THIS IS THE SHIHOKU PROVINCE...
THIS FORTRESS MUST BE CLOSE TO THE BORDER.
FROM THE VIEW OUTSIDE, THESE MUST BE THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS.
AND THAT LEAVES ME HERE.

I REALLY SHOULD'VE BEEN MORE SERIOUS ABOUT MY STUDIES.
...BUT IT'S BEEN SO LONG, IT ALL ESCAPES ME.
THE LADY-IN-WAITING EXAM INCLUDED QUESTIONS ON GEOGRAPHY...

A FORTRESS, JUST LIKE SHENMEI SAID.
THIS BUILDING IS ENCLOSED BY RAMPARTS...
...WITH A GREAT CLIFFSIDE BEHIND IT.
IN THE PAST...
...THERE WAS TALK OF THE FOREIGN ENVOYS ENGAGING IN CLANDESTINE CONVERSATIONS.
IF THEY WERE NEGOTIATING WITH THE SHI CLAN...
...COULD THEY HAVE BEEN TALKING ABOUT THE FEIFA?
THIS COULD BE MY PREJUDICE SPEAKING...
...BUT WHY WOULD AN ELEGANT WOMAN LIKE HER...
...EVER STEP FOOT INSIDE OF A FORTRESS LIKE THIS?

WERE THEY DISASSEMBLING FEIFA...
...TO UNDERSTAND ITS CONSTRUCTION?
ARE YOU GEARING UP FOR WAR?
IT WOULD EXPLAIN A FOREIGN ENVOY'S PRESENCE IN A HOT SPRING VILLAGE.
IT WOULD ALSO EXPLAIN WHY THE HAUGHTY SHENMEI...
...WOULD MAKE HER WAY TO A FORTRESS.
BUT THEN...

THAT ISN'T UP TO ME.
BUT, GIVEN YOU NOW HAVE LADY LOULAN VOUCHING FOR YOU...
I'D ADVISE YOU TO AT LEAST LOOK BUSY.
AND KINDLY AVOID DISPLEASING LADY SHENMEI ANY FURTHER.
CRRRK
KINDLY. RIGHT.
IT'S CHILLY...
SLAM
CLACK

THE DOOR IS LOCKED, THE WINDOWS BARRED.
SHE DIDN'T WARN AGAINST TRYING TO RUN AWAY BECAUSE THAT SIMPLY ISN'T AN OPTION.
OR MAYBE SHE'S IMPLICITLY ENCOUR-AGING ME?
THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT PUNISHMENT IS IN STORE FOR ME IF I CAN'T PRODUCE RESULTS.
THIS DOOR LEADS TO...
THESE ARE USUALLY RESERVED FOR THE FIRST FLOOR, OR A SEPARATE BUILDING.
I SUPPOSE BLOCKING OFF AN ESCAPE ROUTE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN A TOILET THAT'S EASIER TO MAINTAIN.
...A WASH-ROOM?

HAAAAH...
THAT ALMOST SEEMS TO ADD UP, AND YET, NOT QUITE...
I WONDER IF THE PRIOR APOTH-ECARY WAS IM-PRISONED HERE?
I THINK I WAS TOLD HIS OWN DRUGS TOOK HIS LIFE.
EVEN SO.
SNEER
MY NUMBER ONE PRIORITY HERE...
...IS ALL OF THIS!

I'LL TAKE MY TIME WITH THE MEDICINE CABINET, TOO, OF COURSE...
...BUT WHERE ELSE WILL I FIND SUCH A COLLECTION OF BOOKS?
I CAN'T LET THIS CHANCE SLIP AWAY!
OH!
THIS IS...
RSTL
RSTL
OOOH!
HEH HEH HEH ...
HEE HEE HEE HEE!

FROM WHAT I CAN GATHER...
...THE MOVEMENT OF GOODS AND METALS OVER THE YEARS...
...AS WELL AS THE EXPANSION OF THIS FORTRESS THAT WAS ABANDONED IN THE EMPRESS'S TIME...
...INDICATE THE SHI CLAN IS PLOTTING SOMETHING QUITE SINISTER.
I SEE.

THIS IS PLAINLY TREASON. PLOTTING A REBELLION.
IT NEEDS TO BE STAMPED OUT.
SLAM
CLACK
CLACK
CLACK
AH!
AND WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE...
...LAHAN?

FWMP
YOU REALLY SHOULDN'T BE TRAIPSING ABOUT A NOBLE'S OFFICE.
FUSS
FUSS
FATHER!

PEOPLE MAY GET THE WRONG IDEA. STRANGE IDEAS.
ESPECIALLY WHEN THAT NOBLE RIDES THE LINE BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN.

A RATHER INCENDIARY THING TO SAY.
BUT HIS ANGER ONLY MAKES SENSE.
HE DID, AFTER ALL, TRY TO STORM INTO THE INNER COURT ...
...THE VERY MOMENT HE LEARNED MAOMAO WAS KIDNAPPED.
IF ANYTHING, HIS ARRIVAL HERE FEELS ODDLY DELAYED.
HE CAN SPIT AS MUCH VENOM AS HE LIKES...
... BUT THAT CAN'T BE THE ONLY REASON HE CAME HERE.

MMBL
MMBL
I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY, TACTICIAN.
MY OWN INCOM-PETENCE IS TO BLAME. RIGHT?
CLATTER
OF COURSE.
EVEN IF THE SECRET PASSAGE WAS UNBEKNOWNST TO EVERYONE HERE THIS ENTIRE TIME...
...ITS USE AS AN ESCAPE ROUTE IS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO BEAR.
EXACTLY. YOU HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD.
NOD
NOW, WOULD YOU MIND RESCUING MY DAUGHTER? SOONER, RATHER THAN LATER.

I'D BEEN TOLD NOT TO MAKE AN ENEMY OF LAKAN...
...BUT IT SEEMS LIKE IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT.
IF ONLY IT WERE SO EASY.
HOWEVER, EVEN IF HE'S POINTING THE BLAME AT ME...
...HE HAS TO KNOW THERE'S MORE TO IT.
LAKAN'S GOAL IS TO SEE HIS DAUGHTER RESCUED.
WHICH IS TO SAY...
HIS ENEMY, THE ONE WHO STOLE MAOMAO AWAY, IS SHISHOU.

...BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE THE CONFIDENCE TO TAKE MY TRUE PLACE HERE.
I'VE CONSTRUCTED A POSITION I CAN USE TO COAST AND RUN...
WHAT CAN A SHODDY EUNUCH ACCOMPLISH, EXACTLY? TELL ME.
HIS ONSLAUGHT IS CRUEL...
...BUT I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY.
EXCUSE ME.

I HADN'T REALIZED YOU'D FELT THAT WAY ABOUT EUNUCHS.
CLACK
CLACK
AND, I'M SORRY.
I DIDN'T CHOOSE THIS LIFE. I HOPE THAT MUCH IS CLEAR.

U-UNCLE!
NO, NO, NO!
I WASN'T TALKING ABOUT YOU!
NO, NO, A SHODDY EUNUCH LIKE MYSELF CAN'T EVEN WALK PROPERLY.
EVEN NOW, I'M AFFORDED THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING CARRIED TO AND FRO.
AND, EVEN FROM MY POSITION IN THE INNER COURT...
...I FAILED TO KEEP TRACK OF MAOMAO JUST THE SAME.
SURELY, I BEAR SOME RESPON-SIBILITY AS WELL, YES?
UNCLE ...
SOB
UNCLE, PLEASE! YOU MUSTN'T BLAME YOURSELF!
...JUST IN TIME.
?

YOUR ANGER ALWAYS DRIVES YOU TO SUCH AGGRESSIVE ACTION.
I KNOW, UNCLE, I KNOW!
TRY TO REMEMBER WHO YOU'RE SPEAKING TO AT SUCH TIMES.
IT WAS JUST BANTER! TRADING BLOWS!
I DIDN'T REALLY MEAN WHAT I SAID!

BUT I SHOULDN'T SAY THAT.
TRADING BLOWS? HE STARTED IT. I HARDLY SAID A WORD.

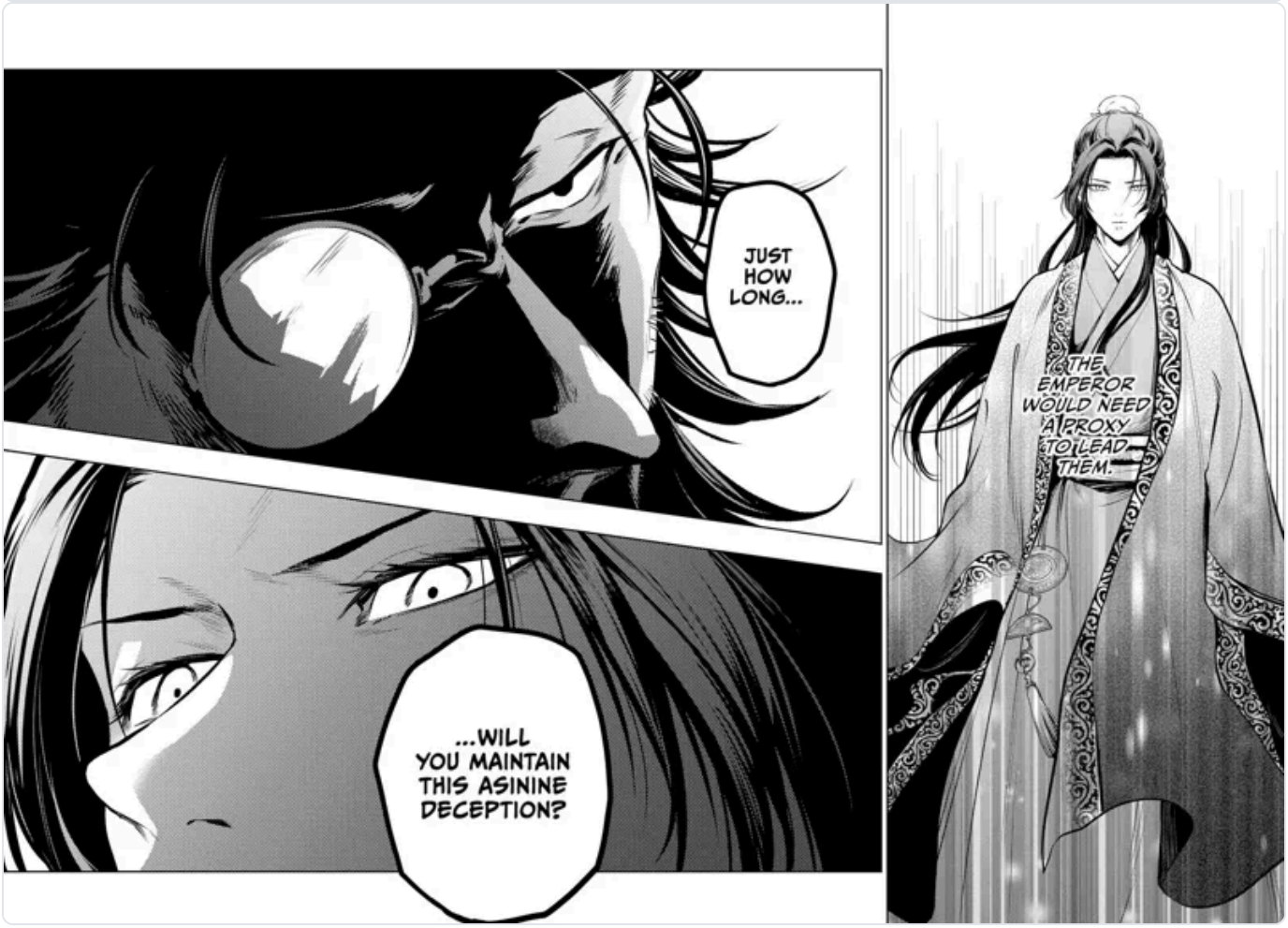
PAP
LAKAN.

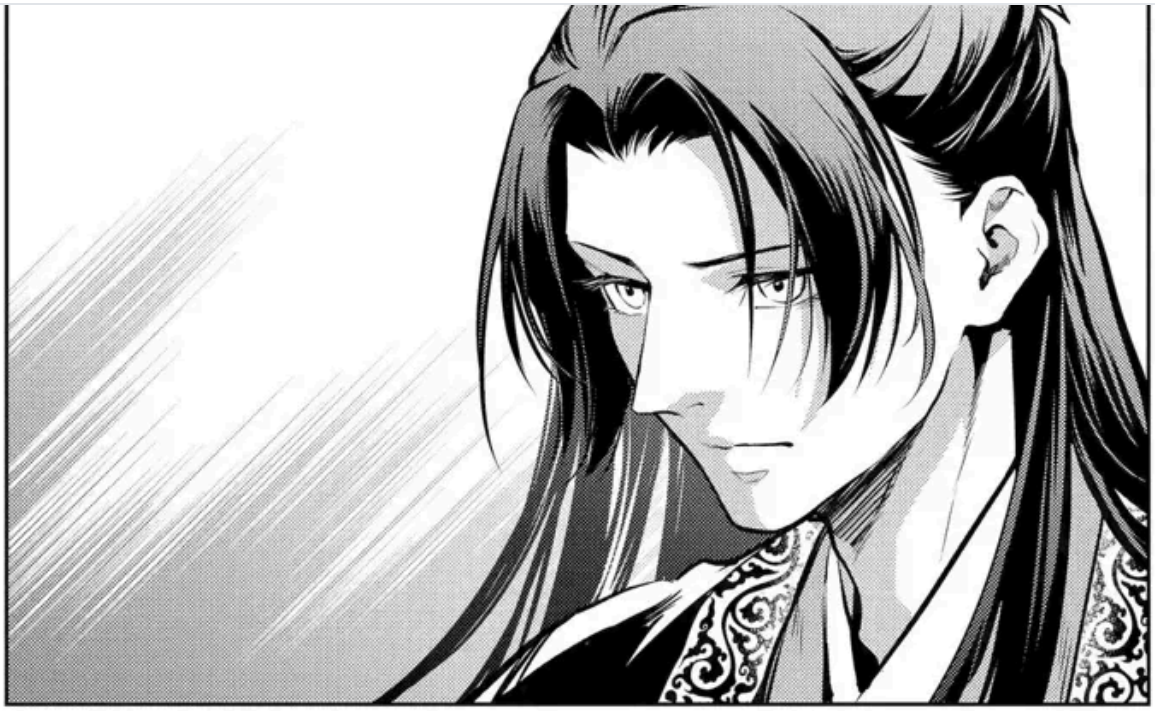
IF YOU DIDN'T MEAN THAT...
...PERHAPS YOU SHOULD SAY WHAT YOU ACTUALLY CAME HERE TO SAY? POLITELY?

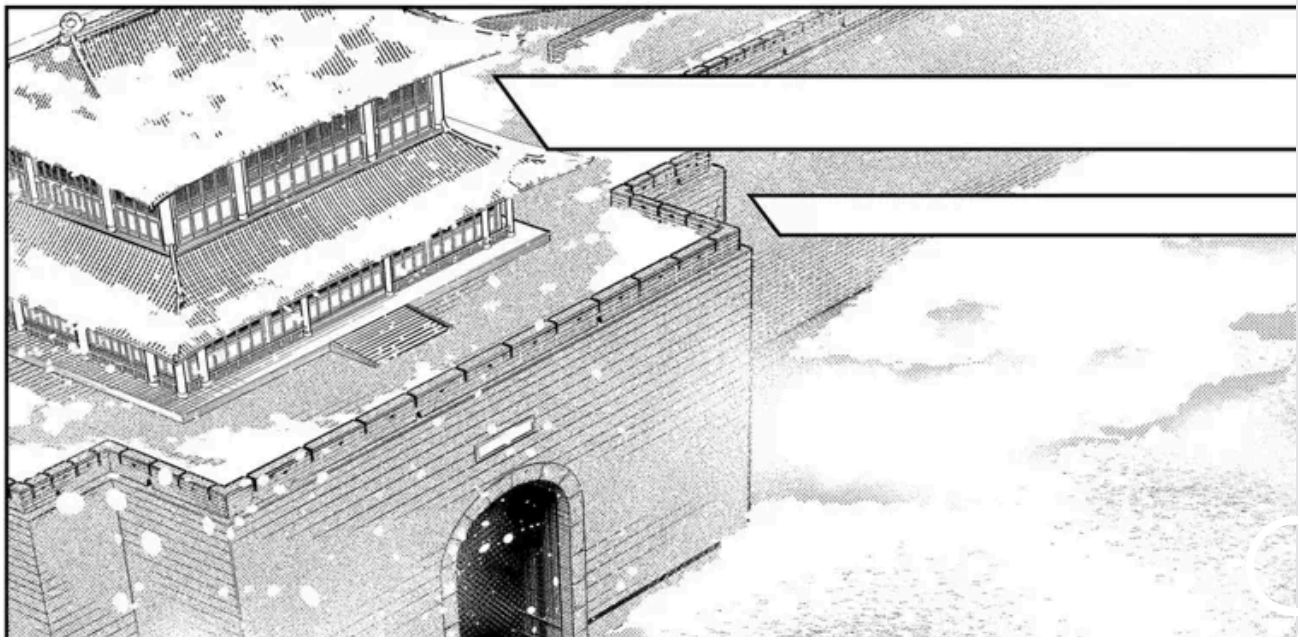
I WOULD LIKE YOU TO MOBILIZE THE ARMY IN ORDER TO DEAL WITH THE TRAITOR SHISHOU.
PLEASE. I BEG YOU.

THE SHI CLAN SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN MANUFACTURING THE LATEST MODEL OF FEIFA FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS.
BETWEEN THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT, AND LOULAN'S ESCAPE...
...WE NEED NO FURTHER EVIDENCE OF TREASON.
WAITING AVAILS US NOTHING MORE. IT IS TIME TO STRIKE.

FOR A MILITARY CAPTAIN TO MAKE A FORMAL REQUEST LIKE THIS, TO MOBILIZE THE ARMY...
...MEANS MOVING THE WHOLE NATION TO COME DOWN ON THE SHI CLAN.
BUT THE EMPEROR CANNOT SIMPLY LEAVE THE CAPITAL TO LEAD.
IT WOULD FALL ON THE FORBIDDEN ARMY, A FORCE UNDER THE DIRECT CONTROL OF THE EMPEROR HIMSELF.


JUST HOW LONG...
...WILL YOU MAINTAIN THIS ASININE DECEPTION?
THE EMPEROR WOULD NEED A PROXY TO LEAD THEM.



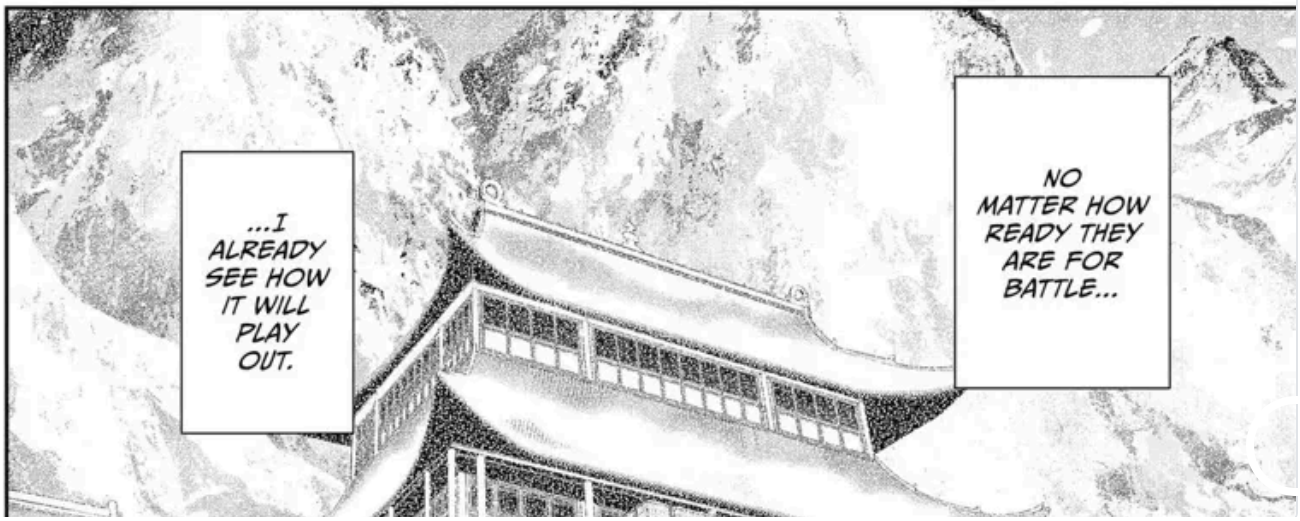


I'VE BEEN HERE FOR ABOUT FIVE DAYS.
...BUT MANY OF THE INGREDIENTS ARE DRIED. PORTABLE FOODS.
SUIREI ALWAYS BRINGS ME MY MEALS.
SOUP AND A VEGETABLE ON THE SIDE. SERVICEABLE ENOUGH...

VOICES FROM THE HALLWAY.
YOUNG MASTER!
YOU MUSTN'T PLAY THERE!
AW, C'MON! IT'S FINE!
BUT STILL...
...A LOOMING WAR. THAT'S NO SMALL MATTER.

THAT'S KYOU-U'S VOICE.
YEAH, YEAH!
HEY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
DON'T FORGET ABOUT SNACK TIME!
I HAVEN'T EXPLORED THIS WAY YET!
THE VOICES OF OTHER CHILDREN, TOO.

THMP
THMP
AH HA HA HA...
SLIP...
HAAH...


...I ALREADY SEE HOW IT WILL PLAY OUT.
NO MATTER HOW READY THEY ARE FOR BATTLE...

THE EMPEROR IS A BENEVOLENT RULER...
...BUT SOME LINES CAN'T BE CROSSED. HE'LL PRIORITIZE MAINTAINING HIS AUTHORITY.
KYOU-U WAS BROUGHT HERE WITH ME. SUIREI WASN'T HAPPY ABOUT THAT.
AFTER AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON A HIGH CONSORT, THE PERPETRATOR WAS HANGED...
... AND HER ENTIRE FAMILY MUTILATED.
A CRIME ON THIS SCALE?
STARTING A WAR WITH THE ENTIRE COUNTRY?
THE ENTIRE CLAN, MAN, WOMAN, CHILD... BABY.
THEY'LL BE COMPLETELY WIPED OUT.

IT'S NO CONCERN OF MINE WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM.
THESE ARE TOTAL STRANGERS TO ME. I DON'T KNOW THEM.
IF ONLY IT WERE SO EASY...